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# Bronx teacher sparks outrage for using black students in cruel slavery lesson

By KERRY BURKE, ESHA RAY and BEN CHAPMAN FEB 01, 2018 | 9:00 PM



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Kids and parents say this Bronx teacher needs a lesson — in racism.

Middle School 118 teacher Patricia Cummings shocked and traumatized children in her social studies classes when she singled out black students and told them to lie on the floor for a lesson on U.S. slavery — and then stepped on their backs to show them what slavery felt like, students and a staffer said.

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Students said Cummings, who is white, pulled the insensitive stunt in multiple seventh-grade classes as part of a unit on the infamous Middle Passage, in which Africans were kidnapped and brought to America as part of the slave trade.

Kids and adults in Cummings' school, where the student body is 81% black and Hispanic and just 3% white, were horrified by the offensive lessons they said occurred roughly two weeks ago.

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"It was a lesson about slavery and the Triangle Trade," said one of Cummings' students, who asked to remain anonymous.

"She picked three of the black kids," the boy said, and instructed them to get on the floor in front of the class. "She said, 'You see how it was to be a slave?' She said, 'How does it feel?' "



Patricia Cummings, a social studies teacher, leaves MS 118 in the Bronx on Thursday. (Andrew Savulich/New York Daily News)

When a girl on the floor made an uncomfortable joke and said she felt fine, Cummings stepped on her back, the student said.

"She put her foot on her back and said 'How does it feel?'" the student said. " 'See how it feels to be a slave?' "

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Cummings was removed from her post for a couple of days following the incident but then returned to class and was in school Thursday.

However, the 34-year teacher was reassigned away from children later Thursday, after the Daily News contacted the city Education Department about her slavery lesson.

"While the investigation has not been completed, these are deeply disturbing allegations, and the alleged behavior has no place in our schools or in society," said Education Department spokeswoman Toya Holness.

MS 118 Principal Giulia Cox declined to comment.

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Teacher Patricia Cummings was reassigned after lesson at Bronx Middle School 118 in which kids say she had black students lie on the floor as she stepped on them. (Howard Simmons/New York Daily News)

Cummings' students said the lesson followed a showing of a video of slaves being beaten, tortured and thrown over the side of a ship.

"She had students lie on the floor," said another kid who was in one of the lessons. "She was measuring the length and width to show how little space slaves had in the ship. It was strange."

Cummings has worked in city schools since 2016 and is also a school cheerleading coach, according to her LinkedIn profile.

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She refused to discuss her lessons when a reporter approached her after school Thursday.



"Excuse me, I'm not talking to anyone, no," she said, when asked if she stepped on black students in her class.

Cummings quotes Nelson Mandela and Walt Disney on her class web page, which also bears the image of a bald eagle and an American flag.

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The web page for Cummings, who teaches social studies. (www.misscummingpage.weebly.com)

"Whatever you do, do it well. Do it so well that when people see you do it they will want to come back and see you do it again," reads the Disney quote.

Cummings' ill-conceived lesson isn't the first time a city teacher has grabbed headlines for giving offensive instruction involving slavery.

In 2013, two teachers from Manhattan Public School 59 taught a lesson that used killing and whipping slaves to teach subtraction and multiplication.

Those teachers weren't disciplined, but they did receive training in cultural sensitivity, Education officials said.

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Ben Chapman is an award-winning reporter who covers education for the New York Daily News. A graduate of Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, Chapman has written more than 2,000 articles about New York City schools for the Daily News since joining the paper in 2009.